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4 November 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : The Current Situation's Potentialities for "Surrender" or "Victory"

I. PROLOGUE

1. Most adjectives, in a sense, are relative terms. Their definition, or at least their applicability to given nouns, generally depends on some point of reference which sets the context within which they are used. Whether or not a woman is pretty depends on one's (often unconscious) standard of beauty. Whether or not a soldier is tall may depend on whether one is comparing him to, say, Henry V's bowmen or Frederick the Great's Potsdam Guards. Words like "success," "failure," "victory" or "defeat," in turn, are what might perhaps be termed adjectival nouns. They also acquire meaning only with reference to some given context or standard of measurement, which is itself often defined in terms of the objectives of the participants or protagonists on whose efforts such labels encapsulate net judgments.

2. To cite an obvious example, one basic objective of those who gathered in Vienna in the fall of 1814 was to devise a system capable of preventing a recurrence of the kind of turmoil engendered by France's revolutionary upheaval and the resultant rise of Napoleon. For all its manifest imperfections, the system devised by these urbane gentlemen survived the stresses of 1848 and, with a few short-lived aberrations such as the Franco-Prussian War,

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kept basic peace in Western Europe for ninety-nine years. This was no mean achievement, especially when it can be respectably (and I think persuasively) argued that the outbreak of the First World War was due not so much to the flaws in the system as to the fact that petty men lulled by its past efficacy failed to apply it. By the standards of its architects, therefore, the Vienna settlement was clearly a success. Had the basic peace it established been measured only in months or even years -- rather than decades -- it would have to have been considered a failure.

3. Turning from Vienna to Vietnam, in the late 1950s the Lao Dong Party ("Hanoi") initiated an armed struggle that has now lasted for approximately fifteen years, depending on how one dates its precise beginning. (This is not quite the slightly less than twenty-two years which separated Toulon from Waterloo, but it is getting into the same league.) Hanoi launched this armed struggle for one principal reason: to prevent the evolution in South Vietnam of a viable state structure not under Communist control. To Hanoi, therefore, the evolution of a situation which enables a non-Communist state to exist in South Vietnam represents failure or defeat -- and "acceptance of defeat" is certainly one legitimate definition of "surrender."

II. THE PRESENT SITUATION'S POTENTIALITIES

A. Hanoi's Risks

4. The present situation is one which Hanoi's own actions at the negotiating table during September and (especially) October 1972 played a major role in creating. By helping create it, Hanoi knowingly acquiesced in the current situation's existence. But Hanoi must also know that creating this situation generated grave risks, including a serious risk of losing -- or at least indefinitely abandoning -- objectives in whose achievement so much has been invested during fifteen-odd years of armed struggle. The current situation, in short, clearly has the potential for evolving in a way that could force Hanoi to accept something very like what its leaders would long have considered a graphic description of defeat, i.e., a kind of surrender. This for several reasons as outlined below.

5. The settlement embodied in the current (17 October) text of the draft agreement leaves intact -- at least for the time being -- a functioning non-Communist state structure in South Vietnam exercising reasonably effective control over the great majority of

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South Vietnam's people. Furthermore, this functioning government possesses about one million men under arms, a pipeline to external (i.e., U.S.) military assistance sufficient to sustain its present military capabilities, and a parallel pipeline to generous financial assistance and economic aid of all forms. Beyond these advantages, external combat support (i.e., the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy) is at least theoretically available if this non-Communist South Vietnamese state should be overtly attacked.

6. The language of the current draft agreement does grant Hanoi's southern organization -- the Provisional Revolutionary Government -- acknowledged and protected control over some South Vietnamese territory. But this territory has yet to be geographically defined and -- barring any radical change in the situation over the next few days or weeks -- most of the South Vietnamese territory to which the Communists can stake any kind of serious claim is virtually unpopulated.

7. The current draft's language also sets up a "structure," the "National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord" (NCNRC), which could be (as Hanoi obviously hopes it will be) the thin end of a wedge to split the GVN assunder, replacing it with a "three-sided coalition of transition" (Pham Van Dong's term) that would pave the way for "reunification," i.e., political conquest under Hanoi's rule -- what Hanoi would call "final victory." But in its present form, this tripartite body is much more decorative than functional. Its duties and responsibilities are minimal and its performance of them hamstrung by a unanimity rule that will prevent it from doing anything either side objects to (which will probably keep it from doing much at all). The NCNRC of the present draft agreement is a mere mole on the GVN's skin, not a cancer in its vitals.

8. Hanoi's acceptance of even the present draft settlement will make the Party's top leadership lose a great deal of face in the eyes of the Party's own cadre, the people of North Vietnam, and the people of South Vietnam. This loss of face, in turn, could easily lead to obvious (though opposite) effects on the morale, zeal, expectations and performance of the Party's followers and its opponents. In briefing its own senior Party cadre, Hanoi is of course putting recent developments in the best possible light. As the official Party line now runs:

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> "The enemies and we have, through secret talks, agreed upon a course of action that will end the U.S. war of aggression and restore peace to Vietnam. This is one of the great victories of our revolution."*

But even in these best-possible-light briefings, Hanoi is forced to admit to the Party's senior cadre how far the leadership's achievements (to date) have fallen short of previous aspirations:

> "Although the ultimate objective of our Party has not been attained, we have achieved national independence and brought the U.S. war of aggression to an end. We have not destroyed the puppet government in South Vietnam and accomplished the task of building democracy (sic) through class struggle, but our victory in putting an end to the U.S. intervention will bring about favorable conditions for our struggle for democracy and the elimination of the puppet government in South Vietnam."*

9. Hanoi of course does not openly acknowledge, even to its own senior Party cadre, how much it has backed down from what it used to insist (adamantly, stridently and without qualification) were minimum "pre-conditions" for its even discussing the detailed outline of a possible settlement. It is a long way indeed from insisting that Thieu must be ousted, and his government dismantled, before talks can even begin to accepting the current draft agreement's language with respect to the NCNRC. Hanoi's problem is that what it used to insist were "non-negotiable pre-conditions" are well remembered and widely known

*Both of these quotations come from paragraph 1-A of a 25 October 1972 report entitled "North Vietnamese Central Party Committee Directive on Implementation of a Ceasefire Agreement and on Actions to be Taken by Both Sides Upon Signing the Agreement," sent to Dr. Kissinger by the DCI on 28 October 1972.

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throughout South, and North, Vietnam -- though with their full panoply of Orwellian techniques, Hanoi's propagandists will strive to erase such memories as fast as possible.

10. There is another significant contrast also widely known and generally well remembered throughout Vietnam, though not in the United States. (In our ahistorical, "NOW"-oriented society, individual memories are often short and institutional memories virtually non-existent.) This is the contrast between the 1972 situation in which (or despite which) Hanoi has tentatively agreed to return to a basically political struggle, and the situation prevailing the last time Hanoi tried the political struggle route -- i.e., in post-Geneva 1954. Hanoi emerged from the 1954 Geneva Conference a clear victor over the French, who were withdrawing from their former Asian dominions in what was regarded throughout Indochina as humiliating defeat. Whatever the Politburo may have privately known about the true state of the Communist military forces' capabilities for further fighting, to the world at large -- and particularly throughout Indochina -- the units of what we now call the NVA were swathed in an aura of invincibility. South Vietnam was in a state of political chaos that virtually all knowledgeable observers -- across the whole political spectrum -- considered an inevitable precursor of total collapse. Pace the trendy revisionist historians of today's New Left, the selection of Diem as Premier (while the Geneva Conference was in train) was a move prompted much more by a spiteful malice that was quintessentially French than by any sinister plots of reactionary American cardinals. A xenophobic, uncompromising Vietnamese nationalist, Diem had long been a thorn in the sides of both the French and the Communists. To the French he was thus the perfect patsy to be left holding the bag as the French walked out the door and the Communists moved in to take over.

11. In 1954, Vietnam had not known "normalcy" since 1940, when the Japanese first moved in. Turmoil had been its hallmark for a generation and the land had been ravaged by nine years of total war. Non-Communist rural administration was virtually non-existent. Diem had the responsibility for governing, but ultimate authority still rested with the discredited Emperor Bao Dai, living in despised luxury on the French Riviera. The "government" Diem inherited was the shattered shell of a polite fiction; his "national army," a disloyal joke, whose commander was then (and is today) a serving general officer in the French Air Force. This "national army" was outnumbered in both guns and men by the combined private armies of the three sects (two with religious pretensions, the third composed of simple bandits).

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The 1954 Geneva settlement, being less than internationally sanctioned "total victory," was clearly less than the Lao Dong Politburo had hoped to get. It was clearly distasteful for the Communist Party to accept what it regarded as only half a loaf. Relying on political struggle to finish the job entailed taking what could perhaps be technically described as a gamble. But given all the factors sketched above -- which in the summer of 1954 made the Vietnamese Communist Party the only disciplined, organized political force in a welter of burgeoning chaos -- the real risk involved in taking this technical gamble must have seemed almost negligible. Among non- and anti-Communist Vietnamese (not to mention virtually all foreign observers), the optimists estimated the nascent GVN's life span in weeks or, if they were really rash, months; the pessimists, in days or even hours.

12. It was the almost literally incredible failure of this seemingly riskless gamble that impelled Hanoi to resume armed struggle a few years later. The trauma of that failure has had a profound influence on the policies of the Hanoi leadership ever since -- particularly on Le Duan, who ran the Party's southern organization from the mid-forties until he was recalled to Hanoi in late 1956 (or early 1957) to take over the duties of First Secretary. When the actual course of the political struggle in the South failed to follow the script History's dialectic had clearly foreordained, it was Diem who emerged victorious from the political struggle and Le Duan, unbelievably, who wound up holding the bag. Deeply scarred by this experience, Le Duan became the architect and overall director of fifteen ensuing years of increasingly intensive armed struggle, which he was adamantly unwilling to abandon anywhere short of total victory. Throughout the mid- and late 1960's, Hanoi could almost certainly have obtained a negotiated settlement that would have taken the Americans out of the game and left the Communists facing a far weaker GVN than Thieu's of the early 1970's or Diem's of the late 1950's. Negotiating the Americans out and relying once again on political struggle to bring the Communists to power, however, was a gamble the once-burned Le Duan was simply unwilling to take. Indeed, the fact that this is precisely the gamble Hanoi now seems anxious to arrange strongly suggests that Le Duan has lost his primacy and perhaps his position.

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13. Whoever they may now be, Hanoi's leaders know -- and they know the Party's ranking cadres (at least) also know -- that there is simply no comparison between the disintegrating, ramshackle farce over which Diem had just been given partial charge when the Party opted for political struggle in 1954 and the governmental machine over which Nguyen Van Thieu presides firmly today. The Party hence is essaying once again a gamble it lost eighteen years ago under overwhelmingly better odds. It is hard to see how the current top Party leaders could consider taking such a risk unless the goal of preserving the southern struggle has come to be regarded as clearly secondary to that of protecting and preserving the socialist North (again, a priority ranking it is hard to envisage Le Duan accepting).

14. One other factor further reinforces this line of reasoning. The cutting edge of the Communist effort in South Vietnam is a 250,000 man army, almost four fifths (78%) of which is composed of North Vietnamese troops.* This army's whole style of fighting presumes the availability of base and sanctuary areas in Laos and Cambodia. The bulk of this army's members speak with an accent that, in South Vietnam, betrays them as foreigners the minute they open their mouths. (NVA troops have never had much success acting or functioning as local guerrillas.) This army's equipment and ammunition is all of Communist bloc origin and is generally incompatible with that used by GVN forces. This, in turn, virtually precludes capture as a serious source of replenishment or replacement and makes the Communist army critically dependent on external lifelines of supply, chiefly via the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" network in Laos. The language of the present draft agreement commits the DRV to withdrawing all its forces from Cambodia and Laos and to refraining henceforth from any further encroachments on these two countries' territorial integrity. If the

*In round numbers, VC/NVA military forces in South Vitnam were estimated to total about 250,000, broken out as follows: Regular combat forces -- 135,000 NVA, 25,000 VC (sub-totalling 160,000). Administrative Service Forces -- 60,000 NVA, 30,000 VC (sub-totalling 90,000). Combined (total) force -- 195,000 NVA (135,000 + 60,000) and 55,000 VC (25,000 + 30,000) for an overall force strength of 250,000. In this force, 84% of the combat troops, 33% of the Administrative Service Forces and 78% of the total forces are NVA.

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DRV were to go very far toward honoring these commitments -- whether by choice, coercion or the working of a moderately effective international supervisory mechanism -- the military muscle backing the Party's political struggle in the South would soon begin to atrophy.

15. Hanoi obviously has its reasons for pursuing its present course of action, reasons that the Politburo or those currently dominant therein consider sufficiently cogent to be worth considerable risk. These reasons most likely relate to what those who now dominate the Politburo consider necessary to preserve the structure and viability of their Communist state north of the 17th parallel. Whatever these reasons may be, however, they have led Hanoi to adopt a course of action involving risks grave enough to engender the potential loss or indefinite abandonment -- i.e. defeat -- of the Party's long struggle to gain political control over the South. Acceptance of these risks hence entails accepting a course of action potentially capable of yielding a result the Politburo has heretofore adamantly insisted would be tantamount to surrender.

B. Hanoi's Opportunities

16. Even if Hanoi has at long last decided that conservation of the Communist North must take at least temporary precedence over the struggle to conquer the South, this certainly does not necessarily mean that Hanoi has written off the Southern struggle. Over the centuries that separate us from Aristotle, libraries have been filled by philosophers expounding the difference between potentiality and actuality. The fact that Hanoi is willing to run risks does not at all mean, let alone prove, that Hanoi has abandoned its ambitions. It will certainly strive to minimize the adverse potential of the dangerous elements in the emerging new situation and exploit any opportunities afforded therein by circumstance, chance or the errors of the party's opponents. The Politburo would never be stridently insisting that a given set of agreements must be immediately signed unless it thought these agreements yielded the Party a net advantage. 4 November 1972, in short, is not yet 9 July 1815. Neither Giap nor Van Tien Dung has been banished to any Asian Elba, let alone a St. Helena. They still command a 250,000-man field army in the South -- an army that may have been battered, checked and contained, but one that has not met any Waterloo.

17. The presence in South Vietnam of this multi-divisional Communist field army, with its tanks and heavy artillery, is of course one great difference between the current situation and that of post-Geneva 1954. As Hanoi and Saigon are both acutely well aware, the language of the 17 October draft agreement's text makes no mention of the North Vietnamese component

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of this Communist army (84% of its combat force) but does require the prompt withdrawal of the foreign military support without which the GVN could not have survived the North Vietnamese Army's onslaught -- all U.S. Naval and air power, all U.S. "in-country" logistic and administrative support plus over 38,000 Korean troops (two divisions, with organic artillery) which have been providing basic security for the strategically situated, densely populated coastal lowlands of Binh Dinh and Khanh Hoa Provinces in MR-2. Though the draft agreements call for an almost immediate cease-fire, their acceptance and implementation would result in a sharp diminution in the GVN's military support, hence, capabilities, unmatched by any corresponding reduction in Communist military capabilities. This fact enables Hanoi to assuage the concerns of the Party's supporters and clearly causes grave concern to the GVN and those who look to it for protection.

18. Though the provisions of the draft agreements, if implemented, would cut off further external support to this Communist field army in the South, that force would not necessarily be as crimped as the current draft's language might suggest. In a cease-fire situation (even allowing for a considerable amount of small-scale violation), this army's "sustaining" requirements would not be very large. A crash logistic effort (which may already be in train) could build forward stockpiles in territory allocated to Communist control that could easily cover these "sustaining" requirements with ample reserve capability to support a sharp series of offensive surges. Furthermore, the language of the current draft is somewhat less explicit, and certainly no more stringent, than the corresponding provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords and, especially, the 1962 "Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos" -- neither of which have ever posed any serious bar to North Vietnamese use of Laotian and Cambodian territory to support Communist forces in South Vietnam. The current draft supplants a tripartite ICC with a quadripartite ICCS, but the latter is subject to the same limitations which effectively emasculated the ICC: a unanimity rule and the lack of an ability to go wherever the Commission -- or any of its members -- wants to go. (The "respect for sovereignty" rubric would make it virtually impossible for the Commission to inspect any places that the side controlling them did not want inspected.) Thus Hanoi could argue persuasively to the Party and its supporters that the current agreement's inspection and supervision provisions pose no greater obstacles than the similar provisions which the Communists have been successfully evading for eighteen years. This point has also not escaped the GVN.

19. On the general question of inspection and supervision to monitor, hence help endorse, both sides' compliance with all of the agreement's provisions -- those dealing with cease-fire observance and proscribing

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further infiltration and external materiel support to Communist forces -- Hanoi has a more general set of related arguments it can use to persuade the Party's cadre that the agreement will work to Communist advantage. Within Party ranks, Hanoi will contend that the agreement's provisions will prove much more onerously restrictive to the GVN than to the Communist side. Hanoi and Saigon both know from the record of the past eighteen years that in the face of Communist intransigeance, the ICCS will probably spend much if not most of its time policing the GVN. Furthermore, the GVN's behavior will be actively and critically monitored by the international, particularly U.S., press corps, many of whose members will be anxious to give the widest possible publicity to any allegations of GVN misbehavior but will judge Communist compliance by different standards. Thus Hanoi can argue -- and the GVN would certainly agree -- that in the real world, inspection and supervision is going to be concentrated largely on GVN behavior, leaving the Communists a relatively free hand so long as they are moderately circumspect and blandly deny any wrongdoing.

20. Hanoi's stickiest Southern problems would derive from the fact that the NCRC (as explained above) is a far cry from any coalition government. The cry is considerably farther in the draft agreement's English text, however, than it is in the current Vietnamese text (a point that has also not escaped the GVN). In reassuring the Party's cadre and supporters, Hanoi can try to cover this -- its weakest argument and greatest source of political risk -- by claiming that the Party has tricked the Americans and actually given up much less than the latter think it has. It can also argue that Thieu loses face, undercuts his position, and clouds his title to sovereignty by accepting even the principle of coalition.

21. Finally -- as the GVN is only too well aware -- Hanoi can argue that the essential political concept justifying and protecting its southern struggle is reaffirmed and even strengthened by the draft agreement's language endorsing the concept of reunification, denying that the 17th parallel is a national boundary (eliminating the Demilitarized Zone in the process), and holding that there exist only three countries in Indochina: Laos, Cambodia, and a unified Vietnam. This provides even stronger ground than that afforded by the 1954 Accords for contending that "Vietnam is one," North Vietnamese troops can not (by definition) ever be described as "foreign invaders" and any military combat or other political stress in any part of "Vietnam" is a purely "internal matter" beyond the rightful ken of any foreign power.

22. None of the above considerations changes the fact that Hanoi's current policies entail great risks for the Party's Southern struggle or that even the present draft's language contains the potentiality for that struggle's

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defeat. In the Politburo's private deliberations, however, and especially in encouraging the Party faithful, arguments and considerations can be marshalled to support the thesis that at least the current agreement draft nets out very much to the Party's advantage, that the Party gets much more than it gives, and that -- in any event -- the concessions it makes to secure U.S. disengagement can be made much more apparent than real. Complementary arguments can also be advanced to support the contention that despite the risks thereby entailed, an agreement which takes the U.S. (with its Navy and Air Force) completely out of the game, at least militarily, creates a situation providing fresh opportunities for the vigorous pursuit of the Party's Southern ambitions.

C. Hanoi's Game Plan

23. Hanoi's strategy is no secret. It was succinctly outlined near the end of the 26 October statement in which Hanoi surfaced its version of the current draft agreements. In its own words, Hanoi intends:

> "... to persist in, and step up the fight on three Fronts -- military, political, and diplomatic -- until these lofty objectives have been achieved, to liberate the South, to defend and build the socialist North, and to proceed to the peaceful reunification of the country."

This is a succinct and candid description of the way the Vietnamese Communists have always fought. They draw no sharp lines of compartmented distinction between military pressure, political action (including psychological warfare) and diplomacy. Distinctions between the latter two are ones of geographic accident more than functional difference. The Vietnamese Communists have always initially gone after their opponents' cohesion, morale, will and expectations much more than (in the first instance) their opponents' territory.

24. The way Hanoi has played its hand over the past six odd weeks strongly suggests that Hanoi's primary objectives are to stop the pressures on the North and get the U.S. militarily disengaged from the struggle. Once these fish are safely in the creel, however, there are others Hanoi would very much like to fry.

25. First and foremost, it wants to erase the principal current obstacle to the achievement of the Party's southern ambitions: Nguyen Van Thieu. Here, however, Hanoi's real target has to be carefully pinpointed. It is not Thieu the mortal man. If he were to die, particularly in a martyr's death, he might well be replaced by someone almost equally bad from Hanoi's viewpoint

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(and perhaps even worse). Instead, Hanoi wants to attack Thieu qua chief executive who can effectively direct the GVN's military, political, and administrative machinery, the symbol and (in a sense) cement that holds the anti-Communist state structure together in reasonable unity. From Hanoi's standpoint, therefore, it would be far more useful to discredit Thieu and emasculate him as a political force than to simply kill him.

26. It is to this end that much of Hanoi's recent and current efforts are clearly devoted to poisoning the relations between Thieu and his principal fount of external support, the U.S. Government. Picking October of a U.S. Presidential election year as the month in which to drive for settlement, unilaterally and suddenly publicizing its version of its private negotiations with the U.S. (including allusions to messages of whose existence Hanoi probably hoped Thieu had been ignorant), insisting that peace can be achieved now -- and all U.S. prisoners soon thereafter returned -- by signing a settlement text to which (Hanoi claims) the U.S. has agreed but over which Thieu has serious reservations, these are all actions deliberately intended to generate the maximum possible friction between Saigon and Washington. Hanoi wants to and will do everything it can to complicate the relationship between the U.S. and the GVN, a relationship it would very much like to rupture, or failing that, sour in a way that inhibits future cooperation and impacts adversely on future U.S. support for any GVN. The Communists have not been able to topple Thieu by their own efforts but they have clearly not abandoned the hope that they may possibly be able to maneuver him and the U.S. into a situation or posture that will help produce this end result.

27. In the kind of war that Hanoi fights, appearance is often as important as reality -- and sometimes more so. In Vietnam (at least) what seems to be often becomes what actually is. For example, if enough people in Vietnam (on both sides of the struggle) come to think that the NCNRC is a coalition government -- or its acceptance is a first move down a slippery slope to coalition from which there can be no turning back -- then the political impact of the NCNRC will be almost as great as it would have been if that body really were a coalition government. In this arena, as in all other local arenas, the Communists will aggressively exploit every psychological and political action weapon to divide and confuse their non-Communist opponents, set the latter squabbling among themselves, erode confidence in and support for Thieu and the GVN -- all to pave the way for an eventual Communist take over. These actions will be backed by terrorist (and sometimes military) muscle, but the Communists do not wage political struggle by frontal assault until they think division or other factors have rendered their opponents incapable of effective resistance and the politico-psychological ground is properly prepared.*

*Sometimes, of course, the Communists make egregious errors in judgment, e.g. Tet 1968 when they thought they could generate popular risings in the cities.

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28. How far Hanoi will go in violating any agreements it has publicly accepted will depend on Hanoi's hard headed calculations of what the traffic will bear and what interests are at stake. It will certainly try to hamstring any provisions for supervisory inspection to give itself as much discretionary latitude as possible. The implied logic of its recent actions strongly suggests that Hanoi will not want to run any serious risk to U.S. re-intervention, resumption of the pressure on the North or termination of any reconstruction aid it may be able to acquire. By its general pattern of behavior (and by putting the maximum possible crimp in inspection machinery), Hanoi will probably try to avoid giving the U.S. grounds for re-intervention that would be saleable as such internationally or, particularly, with the U.S. Congress and domestic population. The Party will certainly pursue its Southern ambitions as vigorously as circumstances permit, but its preferred tactics -- at least for a time -- will probably be those Khruschev described as slicing salami.

III. THE POSTURE OF THE U.S. AND THE GVN -- THE ISSUE OF THIEU

29. If the U.S. and the GVN want to maximize the opportunities presented by the current situation for producing a Communist defeat in South Vietnam, three sorts of action need to be effected in the near future. Two have already been analyzed in separate memoranda (of 30 October and 4 November), namely the defusing of the more dangerous booby traps in the current draft agreement's language and the prompt initiation of a range of steps designed to improve the GVN's position and capabilities for constructive action in any cease-fire, post hostilities environment. The third essential action -- a necessary condition for successful achievement of both of the other two -- involves getting Nguyen Van Thieu to approach the present situation and its future evolution in the proper spirit.

30. Thieu exhibits to a strong, though hardly unique, degree the psychological fusion between personal and national interests (as he perceives them) that is the hallmark of strong political leaders throughout history and around the world. He clearly senses that the present situation touches his most fundamental vital interests, both personal and national, including basic survival. He has his own political constituency (and self-image) to consider, and knows that it is essential (to both) that he not act in a way that supports the charge that he is a U.S. puppet. He thinks he has a much more realistic view than we do of the real politico-military world in Vietnam and is absolutely convinced he has a far better grasp of Vietnamese psychology -- hence the traffic the latter can realistically be expected to bear. He does not trust us in the sense that he is convinced there is always a risk of our selling out his country's vital interests to protect ours of a somewhat lesser order (including transient domestic political advantage). His natural, instinctive suspicions

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on this latter point were highly sensitized by the events of October 1968 -- of which he probably thinks he is now witnessing at least a partial rerun. All of this puts Thieu in a highly charged emotional state and none of it helps put him in what we would regard as a cooperative frame of mind.

31. If we start from the premise that any repetition of 1963 would be contrary to U.S. interests, the "Thieu problem" becomes even more complicated. His ouster -- whether by deliberate choice or the evolutionary consequences of other U.S. actions -- is what Hanoi wants most and we (under the above premise) least. Given Thieu's psyche, however, this means there is virtually no chance of our coercing him into pursuing a course of action to which he is strongly opposed -- without thereby almost inevitably producing a situation we do not want to develop. Furthermore, little is achieved in forcing Thieu to "sign" any given piece of paper if he consequently approaches a post-settlement political struggle with a political and psychological posture that virtually assures an early Communist victory. In sum, to bring Thieu around to a point of view and course of action that will serve our two countries' mutual interests, we have to go the route of persuasion rather than that of coercion.

32. Persuading Thieu to do something -- anything -- is never easy. He is a loner. He is also a shrewd, hard headed, pragmatic and -- to date -- effective Vietnamese politician with a feel for domestic sentiment that he thinks has always been basically correct. But the circle of those to whom he listens is small and in the last analysis he always makes his own decisions, usually keeping his own counsel in the process (though often he masks his private thoughts behind various smokescreens he puts out to test how the wind is blowing from various quarters). Many are beholden to him but, by design, he is beholden to virtually no one (e.g. he depends on the Army as an institution but not on any given clique of generals). Actually, no one ever persuades or convinces Thieu of anything. You have to plant the thoughts and start them moving in a train which, if followed, will lead him to convince himself. But it is almost impossible to plant such seeds in Thieu's mind unless the atmosphere surrounding your dialogue is conducive to fertile receptivity.

33. What Thieu needs to focus on -- or be focussed on (at least from our standpoint) -- is the overwhelming strength of his position compared to that of Diem (whom Thieu respects in retrospect) when Diem beat the Communists in the first round of political struggle. Even allowing for the continued presence of nearly 200,000 NVA troops in South Vietnam, Thieu holds in his present hand more high cards than there were in the whole deck with which Diem played. If Thieu can be brought to realize this fact -- and imaginatively ponder its consequences -- our immediate problems with him will be greatly eased and the chances of the GVN's ultimate success greatly enhanced.

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34. Several steps are probably necessary to bring Thieu to this frame of mind. The first has been almost achieved by the simple passage of time -- Thieu will be much easier to deal with after 7 November. Secondly, it is probably essential that Thieu think we are taking proper cognizance of what he considers his legitimate reservations about the language of the agreement's current text. This is obviously a delicate area, but it is also one in which tone and gesture can be just as important as substance. If he is to become truly cooperative, Thieu will also need to feel that we understand and respect the imperatives of his position as a Vietnamese political leader. Both he and we will have to eschew actions that could give Hanoi an opportunity to sow further seeds of suspicion and discord (e.g. for Thieu, intemperate statements about U.S. officials; for us, private messages to the other side of whose existence Thieu is not apprised). A climate will have to be fostered (or re-created) in which Thieu feels confident of future U.S. support and suppresses his instinctive suspicions that we may be on the verge of selling him out. In the same climate, of course, Thieu will have to be reciprocally receptive to appreciating our political imperatives, including the possible consequences of Congressional action after 3 January.

35. The key to accomplishing any or all of the above is communication in the sense of genuine dialogue. The written word is a poor medium for carrying the primary burden of such nuanced and atmospherically influenced dialogue -- especially the written word conveyed by cable and translated twice into a foreign language. I cannot judge (nor is it any of my business) whether the current personal relations between Thieu and Ambassador Bunker are conducive to this kind of dialogue. If they are, this is the best and easiest channel. If they are not, thought might profitably be given to a personal emissary from President Nixon armed with a Presidential letter. Any such emissary should not be too personally radioactive or presumptively high powered -- else the press, and Thieu, will see him as an arm twister. Ideally he should be favorably known to Thieu from some previous incarnation (Had General Haig not already been cast in the role of a "heavy," he would have been the right sort of choice.) The immediate object of any such emissary's visit would be conversational dialogue contributing to an improved atmospheric climate -- not any specific public act or statement. Indeed, under an optimum scenario such an emissary would visit Saigon and depart before anyone outside a small circle had any inkling of why he was there or attached any importance to his presence.

36. Another dramatic possibility of course is a direct, face-to-face conversation between Thieu and President Nixon. Medicine this big, however, is probably best reserved for symbolizing and solidifying a common purpose after the policies of the GVN and the U.S. have come into public harmony.

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In fact, such a meeting might be most useful after a Thieu-endorsed agreement with Hanoi has actually been signed. If Thieu, still publicly regarded as uncooperative (or even restive), modified his stance after a conversation with our President, the Communists would be certain to charge -- and many of Thieu's non-Communist opponents and followers spontaneously believe -- that the master had finally yanked the puppet's strings.

37. Thieu's importance derives not from any personal perfection (which he clearly does not have) but from the accident of history that has made him the linchpin of organized resistance to Communist ambitions in South Vietnam. Whether one likes him or not and whatever one considers his faults or virtues to be, much of the future evolution of South Vietnamese politics rides on his shoulders and his actions in the weeks immediately ahead. If he plays skillfully and wisely the hand circumstance has dealt him, an agreement along the lines of the current draft can indeed be translated into a Communist defeat and, hence, de facto surrender. If Thieu plays his hand badly or there is any rupture in his relations with his U.S. partner, the emergent agreement probably will serve as a precursor to that "total victory" for which the Vietnamese Communists have struggled for decades.

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